Status and distribution of Hume's (Tawny) Owl *Strix butleri* in the Eastern Desert of Egypt

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Des investigations récentes sur le terrain ont révélé que la Chouette de Butler *Strix butleri* (pour laquelle il n'y avait qu'une seule observation antérieure en Afrique continentale) est un resident répandu dans les montagnes égyptiennes de la Mer Rouge. Son aire de répartition s'étend probablement au sud jusqu'au Soudan.

Introduction

Hume's (Tawny) Owl *Strix butleri* is a little-known owl of Saharo-Sindian affinity. It is primarily restricted to the Middle East, being known from Egypt, Israel, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, with isolated populations in Oman and Yemen[7–9]. It possibly occurs in south Iran, where the type-specimen was reportedly collected[2,5,8] and has recently been reported from Socotra (*Dutch Birding* 21: 230). In Egypt, it is principally known from south Sinai where it is considered a rare and local breeding resident[4].

Hitherto, there has been only one substantiated published report of Hume's (Tawny) Owl from Africa; one collected, on 16 February 1982, by Hesham Sabry, at Wadi Nugrus (24°37'N 34°47'E), a northern tributary of Wadi Gemal in the southern Eastern Desert of Egypt. The skin, housed in a private collection, was subsequently identified as Hume's (Tawny) Owl[5]. Based on this record, various authors reported Hume's (Tawny) Owl as a rare inhabitant of the Eastern Desert[2–4,9]. However, it was unknown whether the specimen represented a vagrant or resident. Baha El Din[1] listed the species for Gebel Elba and Bir Abaq, based on field surveys in 1997, but provided no details.

We report here the findings of field surveys undertaken in 1997–2000 with the objective of clarifying the status of Hume's (Tawny) Owl in the Eastern Desert of Egypt, and assessing its distribution. Hume's (Tawny) Owl inhabits desiccated montane regions, usually around vegetated wadis and oases[8,9]. It is strictly nocturnal and rarely observed during the day, but very vocal during the breeding season, from mid-March to mid-June, when it readily responds to playback of its vocalisation. In Egypt, the species is usually silent during the rest of the year. The Eastern Desert mountains form a rugged backbone of igneous peaks paralleling the Red Sea coast, and skirted to the north and west by limestone and sandstone plateaux. The mountains are mostly below 2,000 m, with the highest peak being Gebel Shayib El Banat, at 2,187 m[6]. Precipitation in these mountains averages c3 mm pa. and is irregular and localised[10]. Given the extreme aridity, plant and animal life is primarily confined to wadi beds. Wells and springs occur in a number of wadis and locally support non-xerophytic biota. Some higher peaks receive orographic moisture that sustains a relatively rich flora; one such area is Gebel Elba in the south-east Eastern Desert.

Materials and methods

Six field trips were made to different locations within the Egyptian Red Sea coast montane strip. Most visits were in April, during the peak breeding season of Hume's (Tawny) Owl, in order to maximise potential response from territorial birds. The species was detected by listening for calls immediately after sunset until midnight, ie the species' peak hours of activity. Searches were also undertaken using playback of vocalisations recorded in Sinai, in order to solicit a response and attract any birds that were present.

Results

A total of 10 Hume's (Tawny) Owl was heard and observed at six locations during four consecutive breeding seasons (see Table 1 and Fig 1). While the species was not recorded at Mons Claudianus, local inhabitants of the Ma'aza tribe recognised the owl's vocalisation and reported that it occurs there. It was impossible to ascertain whether the species inhabits the sedimentary limestone plateaux bordering the basement complex mountains to the north and west. A single attempt to detect the species at Galala El Qebliya Plateau did not yield a response.

These observations conclusively confirm that Hume's (Tawny) Owl inhabits the Eastern Desert of Egypt and can be considered a resident component of the African avifauna. It appears to be a scarce, but widespread resident breeder. Existing data suggest that its distribution extends the length of the Red Sea mountains, from north-west of Hurghada south to Gebel Elba, immediately north of the political bound-

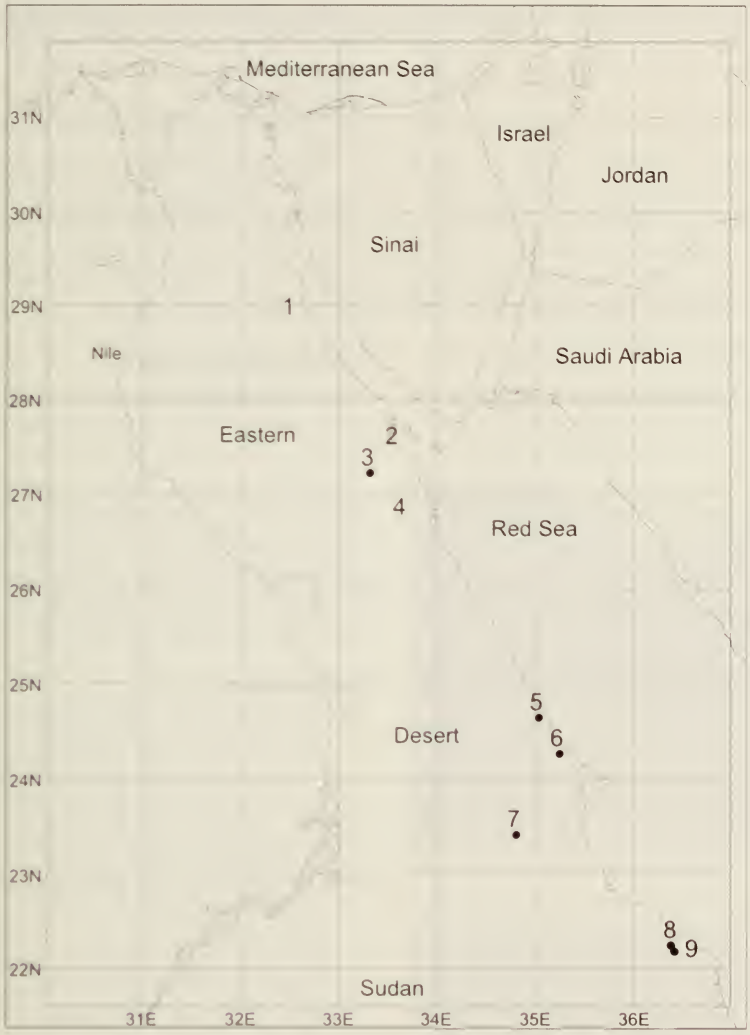

Figure 1. Map of search localities for Hume's (Tawny) Owl *Strix butleri* in the Egyptian Eastern Desert (1997–2000). Dots indicate localities where positive evidence of the species' occurrence was detected. Figures refer to the site numbers in Table 1.

Table 1. Search results for Hume's (Tawny) Owl *Strix butleri* in the Egyptian Eastern Desert (1997–2000).

Site no.	Location	Coordinates	Date	Evidence of presence
1	St. Paul Monastery	28°56'N 32°21'E	6/4/1999	None
2	Bir Mallaha	27°34'N 33°28'E	14/4/1998	None
3	Mons Porphyrites	27°15'N 33°18'E	13/4/1998	Heard and seen
4	Mons Claudianus	26°49'N 33°29'E	26/4/2000	None, but locals recognise the call
5	Wadi Gemal	24°38'N 35°02'E	13/4/1999 & 23/4/2000	Heard and seen
6	Wadi Rada	24°16'N 35°14'E	22/4/2000	Heard and seen
7	Bir Abraq	23°25'N 34°48'E	5/4/1997	Heard
8	Wadi Aideib	22°13'N 36°24'E	1/4/1997	Heard
9	Wadi Rabdeit	22°10'N 36°26'E	31/3/1997	Heard

ary with Sudan. Though neither nests nor young have been discovered in the region, our records of territorial birds during the nesting season provide ample evidence of local breeding.

Observations of Hume's (Tawny) Owl in the Eastern Desert come from rather narrow mountain wadis, usually with relatively lush vegetation cover, often including some trees (*Acacia* sp, *Tamarix* sp). However, the species was also found in more open, less vegetated terrain. The individual at Mons Porphorytis was at relatively high elevation (660 m), with very little vegetation and no trees.

Territories appear to be relatively large. Vocalisations in the sparsely vegetated montane terrain carry over several kilometres. Individuals over 5 km distant responded to playback and were attracted to within a few metres. Sometimes individuals would call incessantly, on one occasion for up to an hour after playback was ceased.

Observations indicate that the species forages along wadi systems. Little is known concerning the diet preferences of Hume's (Tawny) Owl. According to Snow & Perrins[9], it feeds mainly on small mammals, but also takes small birds, lizards and arthropods.

Discussion

The nearest populations of Hume's (Tawny) Owl occur in montane south Sinai and Saudi Arabia, east of the Red Sea and Gulf of Suez. As these regions share a relatively similar geomorphology and ecology with the Eastern Desert mountains, and have relatively similar avifaunas, it is not wholly surprising that the species occurs west of the Red Sea[3].

It is perplexing that Hume's (Tawny) Owl, a relatively large species and potentially one of the most widespread resident birds of prey in the Egyptian Red Sea mountains, should escape detection for so long. This presumably reflects the limited systematic ornithological coverage of the area, and the species' strictly nocturnal nature. Moreover, it indicates that present knowledge of wildlife resources of arid north-east Africa remains incomplete, partly due to a tendency to overlook and undervalue the biodiversity of this region through its perceived species impoverishment.

It is probable that Hume's (Tawny) Owl has a wider distribution in Africa than previously reported. The mountains form an almost continuous range parallel to the Red Sea coast, from Suez south to the Bab El-Mandab strait. It is probable that the species occurs in the Red Sea mountains north of Mons Porphyrites, as this area also contains suitable habitat. Likewise, it is quite possible that its range extends south into Sudan, and possibly to Eritrea and Djibouti. The species' potential presence in eastern Sudan and the Horn of Africa demands investigation, especially given the recent report from Socotra. Further detailed studies are also required to shed light on the ecology of this little-known species.

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